



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 14(3) 2021: 1256-1273

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v14i3p1256

Published 15 November, 2021

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses presence of populist rhetoric in the behaviour of two Slovak prime ministers who have been responsible for managing the COVID-19 pandemic. It is based on Brubaker's (2017) work on populism and tries to identify his six elements within the area studied. The main argument is that even though these two actors have different political backgrounds and experience, both use a populist repertoire in their communication and actions and having to deal with a crisis such as COVID-19 pandemic is not the reason to not use it. It is important to analyse societal structures as the COVID-19 pandemic not only put lives at risk, but also economic and social rights and the security of the state.

KEYWORDS: populism, Slovakia, COVID-19, government, elements of populism

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was first identified in 2019 and the first cases in Europe were confirmed in January and February 2020. The first nine countries affected had reported forty-seven cases by 21 February 2020 (Spiteri 2020). The blow that hit Europe in the first quarter of 2020 has posed an enormous challenge for many states which have never before faced a crisis of this nature. From its beginnings in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the life of people all around the world. Governments have been put in a very difficult position as well, since they are responsible for people's lives while balancing economic concerns and their countries' safety.

Here we consider the case of Slovakia, a European Union (EU) member state which is an interesting case study for research as the outbreak of the pandemic coincided with an election and a change of government. Parliamentary elections were held on 29 February 2020 and the first case of COVID-19 in Slovakia was confirmed just six days later, on 6 March 2020. The new government that took office on 21 March 2020 represented a complete alternation of power, with all government representatives changed. At this point there was not a high number of cases in Slovakia or in the neighboring Visegrad Four states (Czechia, Hungary and Poland). Slovakia had the lowest COVID-19 death rate within the EU during the period of government transition and for many months afterwards. Although the mandate of the old government continued for only 3 weeks after the elections, it was this government that was responsible for deciding to introduce a state of emergency for hospitals and to adopt initial measures for dealing with the pandemic. The outgoing government was led by the leftist Direction-Social Democracy (Smer -SD) party, which had been in power, alone or with coalition partners, for twelve of the previous 14 years. Its coalition partners in its most recent term in office were two centre-right parties, the Slovak-Hungarian Bridge party (Most-Híd) and Network (#Siet'), and the nationalist right Slovak National Party (SNS). The strongest party in the new government was Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), whose leader Igor Matovič became prime minister, and both OĽaNO and its three coalition partners (We are family, Freedom and Solidarity and For the People) are right-of-centre. Both the outgoing and incoming governments and their leaders had populist tendencies in their communication styles and political activities.

Because of the interesting timing of the change of government in Slovakia, we posed two research questions: How was the debate about measures to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic framed under the two different prime ministers in Slovakia? How can we define the two governments' pandemic measurements in terms of their populist repertoire and the paradoxes suggested by Brubaker (2017; 2020)?

We are using Brubaker's definition of populism as a framework to study Slovakia during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 because populism is perceived to be one of the greatest threats to liberal democracy. Our aim is to identify populist rhetoric in the steps taken by the two different governments which dealt with the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia. One of the important outcomes of this article is identifying the influence of these populist elements and their potentially destabilizing effects on democracy in Slovakia.

Our article is structured as follows. We start with a brief literature review focused on populism and the context of democracy. Later we discuss in detail how it relates to the pandemic. The next part explains our data collection methods and research design, followed by analysis and conclusion.

In a broader context we hope to contribute to the burgeoning literature on populism, where attention is mainly paid to two other Central and East European (CEE) countries, Hungary, and Poland (Brubaker 2017a, Bušíková & Guasti 2019), where policies are detrimentally affecting not only EU principles and the rule of law, but also democracy itself. Our research will fill a lacuna by looking at populism and democracy in CEE with a focus on Slovakia and on the behaviour and statements of individual politicians. We aim to understand the discourse of selected political actors by using Brubaker's (2017) populist repertoire.

2. Populism as a sexy tool for politicians

Urbinati (2014) argues that liberal democracy is being disfigured by three key concepts – technocracy, populism and plebiscitarianism. Of these three concepts we are looking more closely into one of the “disfigurations” – populism.

Populism has become an increasingly popular term recently and has become so broadly defined that it is almost ambiguous. There is therefore a need to focus on this term as a tool for research analysis and a category for scholarly practice, rather than arguing whether it is an ideology, a strategy-biased style or a discourse. Research in political science and sociology has recently been “invaded” by an increasing interest in studying populism, so our analysis is based on the more recent principles of populism put forward by Brubaker.

Margaret Canovan (1999) in her seminal work on populism looks at it from a theoretical and historical perspective. What Roger Brubaker (2019) did was similar, but he updated the historical research looking at nationalism.

However, there is research by many authors that uses the concept of populism to explain many different societal phenomena. The “awkward conceptual slipperiness” (Taggart 2000, 1) in the analytical debate could be divided into several elements. Firstly, there are authors who focus on the term itself and its conceptualization (Canovan 1999; Taggart 2000; Laclau 2005; van Kessel 2014, Kaltwasser et al. 2017). As Canovan puts it, “Populism in modern democratic societies is best seen as an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society” (1999, 3). Other researchers follow Laclau’s (2005b, xi) definition that “populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political”. Others take a different approach, focusing on two main elements, the people and the elites, and it is this that we are doing in this analysis.

Canovan (1999) explains that populism is a political struggle to establish who can claim to better represent the people, who is more in touch with ordinary people and who has a more authentic voice. Similarly, Pannizza (2017) defines ‘the people’ as a political actor and populism as a form of political identification. In his earlier work, he explained the importance of how the people is imagined: “...traces of the original image of the people as dangerous and irrational plebs still resonate in late modern politics, in an uneasy articulation with that of holders of democratic rights” (Pannizza 2005, 15). Mudde (2004) called these two elements homogeneous and antagonistic camps - “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”. These two parts of society shall be the holder of, and expression of people’s general will. Spruyt et al. (2016, 3) explain why populism appeals to people. For those who are attracted to it, the main condition the authors describe is uncertainty. Instead of thinking about “my problems” they think about “our problems”. The next reason why populism is appealing is that it tries to bridge the gap between the poor and the elites, and thus targets the “economically vulnerable”.

However, recent research on populism also looks more closely at discursive language analysis. Kazharski and Makarychev (2020, 167) studied populism “as a performative style rather than an ideologically marked or politically substantialist construct”. Even Norris and Inglehart (2019, 4-5) understand populism as “a style of rhetoric reflecting first-order principles about who should rule, claiming that legitimate power rests with ‘the people’ not the elites. [...] Populist leaders claim that the only legitimate source of political and moral authority in a democracy rests with ‘the people’”.

Populism has been defined as a communication phenomenon that to a certain degree can be measured by the frequent or infrequent use of characteristic content and style features, resulting in various types, such as complete, excluding, anti-elitist or empty populism (de Vreese et al., 2018). However, as already discussed, there are problems agreeing how the concept of populism should work when it comes to theorizing and practical research. A conceptual map of populism is thus hard to build. The novelty of our article is that we choose to apply Brubaker’s (2020) paradoxes in the context of his anti-institutionalism (2017), and for this we use developments about the specific case study of Slovakia during the pandemic.

Brubaker’s (2017, 358-360) understanding of populism has two facets. One is more a question of concept, an analytic category which is “a discursive and stylistic repertoire [...] or a] useful conceptual tool” (358). In

the second understanding he is focusing on it as a “phenomenon of the world”. He further identifies one main and five additional populist repertoire elements. First, it is about the people and the elite element, through which Brubaker defines different groups of citizens to whom political representatives communicate their messages. There are those in groups of so-called elites, who have a better position in society. This element he divides into a horizontal and a vertical form. “In the vertical dimension, ‘the people’ are identified in opposition to economic, political and cultural elites” (Brubaker 2017, 363). He continues with a claim that in this case it is important to focus not only on those above the people, but also to capture the whole vertical spectrum including those who could be perceived as being beneath the people group. The horizontal dimension of this element is that “the people are understood as a bounded collectivity, and the basic contrast is between inside and outside” (Brubaker 2017, 363).

Brubaker continues with the further elaboration of populism through five more elements: antagonistic re-politicization; majoritarianism; anti-institutionalism; protectionism and what can be called a populist style of presentation.

Firstly, antagonistic re-politicization describes decision-making processes based on opposition reactions and democratic control and represents a strict line between two groups – the elites and the people. Under re-politicization, the people take over political power and influence “depoliticized domains of social life” (Brubaker, 2020, 23, note 1). Secondly, majoritarianism presents rights and interests depending on whether they are protecting and promoting the majority or a minority. The majority represents the large number of ordinary people, while minorities can be a small, specific group in society. The presence of a majoritarian element could be visible for example when implementing multicultural policies, which can favour a small group of people and be a costly process paid for by the taxes of the majority. Usually, it is the elite group which is in favour of these policies and populist actors would criticize them and put themselves in the position of the ordinary people who have to pay for it.

In looking at the third element, anti-institutionalism, Brubaker considers institutions as an element of power construction for populists in power. There is high probability that “once in power, populists may construct their own institutions and seek to dominate and work through existing ones” (Brubaker, 2017, p. 365). This behaviour can lead to political parties’ splitting, with the tendency to create new parties, based mostly on the leadership of one dominant figure. Brubaker continues with other manifestations of this element. Populists attempt to use direct forms of democracy or other ways to engage people in decision making. Another very important characteristic of this element is that populists “distrust autonomy of [existing and established] institutions”. They have a tendency to attack or cast doubt on the media, courts, health-care institutions, academic institutions etc. Protectionism, as the next element, manifests itself in different ways to protect the people. Brubaker (2017) differentiates between economic, cultural and securitarian protectionism. Often there is a visible crisis rhetoric; situations, and responses to critical issues, are dramatized and populists also refer to what they are doing to prevent a threat arising. We can consider the use of fear (of a selected scapegoat) as part of this element.

The last element is the mode of communication or how populists communicate their messages. Brubaker (2017) focuses on several aspects such as plain authentic language, the aim of self-presentation, various ways of attention seeking and breaching the rules for acceptable speech and political correctness.

Interestingly, in his study of the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis situation which has become the subject of both political and social research, Brubaker (2020, 2) defines three paradoxes of populism. These are “distrust of expertise, antipathy to government regulation and scepticism toward elite overprotectiveness.” Again, he is looking at these elements via the language of presentation – gestures and speeches.

We also note that, as Rooduijn (2018) has pointed out, the concept of populism has started to be sexy, with focus on concerns about its influence on democracy. Urbinati's work has already been mentioned, and Kaltwasser and Mudde (2012) have also raised interest in the topic of populism and whether it should be viewed as a threat to democracy. Insofar as the core of populism is representing the will of 'the people', they describe the relationship between democracy and populism in a positive manner. More recently, others have written about the rise of populism and its connection to democracy's "survival", mainly in the western part of the world where liberal democracy, a free economy and respect for core values (such as human rights, independent press, free elections) are sacred (Mounk, 2018, Runciman 2018, Applebaum 2020). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) describe the danger of losing democratic support when the core principles of liberal democracy and the rule of law are at stake as this can lead to the death of democracy. Weyland (2020, 402) similarly claims that the "populist threat to democracy depends on a polity's institutional strength".

Our own analysis focuses on the presence of a specific style of doing politics (Moffitt 2016, 2020) and populist behaviour in two of Slovakia's governments. We believe it is important to analyse the structures in society during the period when the COVID-19 pandemic put at risk first of all lives and secondly the economic and social rights of all people and the security of state and thus its democratic values.

3. Slovakia in a populist trap

The Slovak case provides a unique opportunity to study the behaviour of two different governments in the very early stages of the pandemic. We also argue that it is valuable to look at the Slovak case from a different angle: the European Union is facing an unprecedented decline in the understanding of its values, rules, and procedures, mainly in the CEE states. Path dependency and the history of these former Soviet bloc countries may be an explanation for their specific behaviour in this case. The concept of path dependency "characterizes specifically those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or changes" (Mahoney, 2000, 507), and although tracing path dependency is not the goal of our research, some scholars (Hanley et al 2018; Vaduchova 2020) consider such factors in their research on the CEE countries. Other authors, such as Nyssönen and Metsälä (2021), based their research on the rankings of democracy indexes and argue that Eastern Europe is following the path to illiberal democracy. Similarly, Bugarič (2019) argues that democracy in CEE is under threat in a constitutional sense due to populism in combination with ethnonationalism and authoritarianism. Norris and Inglehart (2019, 76) explain that it is not only in these countries that "authoritarian-populist leaders have actively undermined democracy. The rise of similar forces in long-established democracies threatens social inclusion, toleration, and diversity, as well as diminishing public confidence in representative institutions." As mentioned above, Poland and Hungary are under close observation by the EU and face possible penalties for democratic backsliding. The European Union has confirmed that there is 'rule of law backsliding' in these countries, mainly in terms of non-compliance with common values due to the populist behaviour of their governments, as shown by numerous European Court of Justice rulings.

Krastev (2007, 58) described the rise of populism in Poland as an example of "the Central European paradox", in contrast to the successful story of post-communist liberalism. In his latest book, *Pandemic and Europe*¹, he uses the example of Hungary during the COVID-19 pandemic to prove that Orbán's populist actions are undemocratic. "Democracy establishes a state of emergency on behalf of self-protection and not because it can" (Krastev, 2007, 87) and from this follows the principle that temporary decisions shall still be conditional on approval. This may lead to the explanation that populism could be understood as a response to a crisis of legitimacy. Bugarič (2019) also presents a legal analysis of the various steps taken by populist

¹ Authors' translation of *Pandémia a Európa* (2020).

governments in these countries against the institutions, civil rights and freedoms, rule of law, the media and electoral rule that led to the dismantling of almost all key corner stones of democracy.

Recent studies of populism in Central and Eastern European countries (including the Balkan states) show that they are rather distinct from the West European experience. This may be connected, at least to a certain extent, with regional patterns, remembering Wallerstein's urging of "scholars to transcend the chimera of the supposedly distinctive arenas of society/economy and politics" (in Adler 2013, 213). Indeed, some researchers (Holmes 2019, Vaduchova 2020, Brubaker 2019, Buzalka 2018) emphasise a vantage point that sociological theory is less focusing on cultural factors, traditions, nationalism and at some point, Church relation. A reality check of ideas, expectations and practice does not really provide connections to illiberalism/backsliding for "older" democracies like those that the countries of CEE are experiencing. Factors connected to path dependency in those countries because of their pre/post-communist development such as transition experience and consolidation within EU/NATO and Schengen (which differs even within CEE) should be the focus of research aimed at better understanding and explaining this phenomenon. The main focus of researchers is the party system, electoral politics and political parties (Euro-sceptic party politics, right-wing populism), illiberalisation/anti-liberalism (Havlík 2019, Bušíková and Guasti 2019, Buzogány and Varga 2019) and backsliding factors (Rupnik, 2007; Enyedi 2020; Stanley, 2019). Thus, there are many definitions of the term authoritarian populism², illiberal populism or populist democracy used in the social sciences, and not only for the CEE region.

We can therefore see the depth of the populist phenomenon that needs to be analysed looking at experience in the democracies of the CEE region apart from Hungary and Poland. The need for a bigger picture of such a broad and complex contemporary phenomenon as populism is the reason why we are aiming to explain the Slovak case by tapping into the political mood and using discourse analysis to broaden the multidisciplinary approach in the study of populism.

Slovakia is not entirely unexplored when it comes to the study of populism, as evidenced by existing research. Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov (2008) analysed national populism and identified political attitudes and socio-cultural background factors of such politics in Slovakia. Deegan-Krause and Haughton's research focused not only on CEE (2018) but also specifically on Slovakia (2009), where they look at the categories of populist appeals in party politics. Other scholars have also researched populist attitudes among Slovak political parties. Učeň (2015) and Spáč (2012) have identified populist attitudes in the Slovak party system. Later Deegan-Krause (2012) identified three concepts - populism, democratic consolidation and nationalism - and their relationship during two Slovak governments in the 1990s. Szomolanyi and Gál (2016) researched Slovak elites and their compatibility with EU elites. Current research is mainly focused on social media (Kluknavská, Hruška 2019) while our research explores different lacunae in the field of populism.

3. Research design

Our research is based on comparative content analysis. By looking at their communications, it focuses on different aspects and strategies of governments, including security, the economy, individual rights and freedoms and the attitude of governments towards different groups of citizens. The paper includes two levels of comparison. It compares the premierships of Peter Pellegrini and his successor Igor Matovič and how they framed the COVID-19 pandemic in their speeches in parliament. The second level of analysis compares the behaviour of the new Matovič government during the first wave of the pandemic (which started in March 2020) and the second one (which started approximately in September 2020). The timeline for the study has

² See **Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index 2019 – there are eleven authoritarian populist governments, and of the V4 only the Czech Republic is not listed (Timbro 2019, 24). Also, Norris (2020) confirmed populist tendencies in these countries based on "systematic global empirical evidence" - www.GlobalPartySurvey.org.**

therefore been set from 1 January 2020 to 30 September 2020. The outcome of the paper will provide qualitative content analysis looking at relevant statements on COVID-19 as well as studying anti-pandemic measures. The focus of both parts of the research is the two leading politicians, Pellegrini and Matovič. Pellegrini started the period of the pandemic as prime minister so the very first steps taken were his responsibility. At that time Matovič was a member of parliament. After the election in February 2020, he became prime minister and Pellegrini a member of parliament. With respect to the measures taken we will focus directly on the creation of new institutions and the dominance of the prime minister within the existing ones as an indication of whether their acts had an anti-institutionalist element.

Within the empirical part of our study, we firstly identify why the behaviour of governmental actors could be perceived as populist, as well as whether and how populism was adopted in their statements in parliament. In order to do that, we use Brubaker's elements to identify the presence of populism in the rhetoric of Slovak leaders. Each element presents a single unit of analysis. Based on Brubaker's definition, we have identified possible codes under each element, and we try to identify them in the parliamentary speeches of two actors: Igor Matovič, the Slovak prime minister from 21 March 2020 to 1 April 2021, who had also been a member of parliament since 2010; and Peter Pellegrini, who had been in parliament since 2006, and was prime minister from 22 March 2018 to 21 March 2020, which means he was in office during the very early period of the first wave of the pandemic in Slovakia. We will analyse their official statements in the national parliament because we perceive parliamentary discussions to be an important channel for communication in liberal democracies. There are also many scholarly and popular debates on the effects of on-line politics via social media (e.g., the posts of President Trump) which reach far beyond "classical" political analyses and may be of considerable interest to the public and the media. However, in our text we decided to research parliamentary debates less from a political theory perspective or as quantitative social science, but rather to base our analysis on Laski's saying that „parliamentarism appears as essentially government by discussion“ (Laski, 1921 as cited in Schmitt, 1985, 7). Debate on proposals and solutions offered is vital to the legitimacy of the institutional structures which protect liberal democracy and develop checks and balances, the division of powers and the protection of civil rights. According to Proksch and Slapin (2015, 5) parliamentary speeches “play a more direct role in the policy-making process” and give information on the strategies of various politicians. They see speeches in parliament as a communication tool between members of parliament, political parties and, in particular, the electorate. Even though the effects of debate and the exchange of opinions is dependent on the principle of freedom of speech and the rules in each institution, it is a fundamental part of law making and informed decision making (voting). In the case of opposition parties and members of parliament (which we study in both parts of our research), plenary sessions and speeches can serve as a forum where they can perform themselves and also scrutinize the government. There are many studies focused on parliament that research it from different angles, for example the government scrutiny function or the control role of national parliaments in EU affairs (Auel and Christiansen, 2015; Hefftlar et al. 2015; Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Grinc, 2021). We think that debates serve as a communications channel and that this is the most important role for the parliament, and this view is supported by Steiner et al. (2005), who argue that parliamentary talk matters because it is crucial to the functioning of institutional rules and mechanisms. By looking at speeches as a communication tool we are trying to find out more about the populist repertoire in order to answer our research questions, which is: How was the debate about the COVID-19 pandemic measures framed under two different prime ministers in Slovakia? How were the proposed decision-making processes perceived in terms of the populist repertoire and Brubaker's (2017) paradoxes? The aim is to identify the discourse created by selected actors during the period of the pandemic.

The content analysis has been conducted using a deductive coding system, and as Stuckey (2015, 8) says, “[p]redetermined coding [may be] based on a previous coding dictionary from another researcher or key concepts in a theoretical construct”. In our case we use Brubaker’s perception of populism and his elements as the theoretical background and we use one main and five additional elements as the main coding groups. Under each group we have tried to add specific codes, determined by the theoretical background (Table 1).

Table 1 – Coding

<i>Coding Group</i>	<i>Specific codes</i>
The people and the elite	The people and the elite
Antagonistic re-politicization	Repeating of depoliticized topics Putting issues solved long ago back on the table
Majoritarianism	Majority over minority Claims against those on top, on the bottom, at the margins
Anti-institutionalism	Institutions or their form Cooperation/leadership in institutions Opinion polls Tendencies to direct democracy Individualism Attacks on the media and the way they work Attacks on established structures Questioning of established structures/experts
Protectionism	We and the others Security Protection Crisis rhetoric Dramatization Repeatedly referring to things accomplished Fear
Communication	Theatricality Plain language Political incorrectness Attention seeking Assertiveness Authenticity not intellectualism Self-presentation

Source: Authors’ of the article

We have extended the elements in the main coding categories with regard to context. We are interested in what contexts, and in discussing which topics, the actors have demonstrated populist behaviour and which areas interest them when they argue. We excluded health care or health issues in general as Brubaker (2020) claims that there was a paradox with respect to populism and the COVID-19 crisis. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic is primarily a health crisis, different actors moved the crisis to other portfolios. This not only extended our analysis but is also partially influenced by Brubaker’s (2017) division in the element of protectionism, which can refer to different aspects such as the economy or culture as well as security. We have decided to use more contextual codes as the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced wider aspects of the lives of ordinary people. These sub-codes of context are economic issues/rights, political and social issues/rights,

individual freedom, collective goods, justice, privacy or rights in general. We have also decided for these categories as they reflect the state of democracy. It is important that according to the latest statistics on the pandemic situation all around the world, 60 per cent of countries have adopted COVID-19 pandemic laws which violate democratic principles (IDEA, 2020). We use these codes to analyse the content of parliamentary debates from 1 January 2020 till September 2020. We focus only on speeches by the actors selected, Pellegrini and Matovič. At first, we wanted to code only those parts of their speeches that were related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but in the first quarter of the year the election campaign dominated, which meant there was no discussion of COVID-19 in parliament. We therefore decided to code this period separately and we tried to identify populist elements in other contexts apart from the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining period after the election was analysed only in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second part of the analysis focuses on steps taken by both government leaders in order to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. We have used process tracing as a suitable method for this part, as this method helps us to follow the “unfolding of events or situations over time” (Collier, 2011, 824). We focus directly on the institutional character of the debate, which means that we study how the actors use existing structures to handle crisis. We believe the state already had mechanisms to deal with the crisis situation and our aim is to find out how the actors concerned used them. This part of our analysis follows Brubaker’s (2017) anti-institutional element and paradoxes (2020) and tries to identify it in Slovak politics by looking at the decision-making processes adopted, and the different platforms used for decision making. Our sources of data were mostly official press releases from the Government Office of the Slovak Republic, combined with press releases from the Ministry of Health as well as other secondary literature, mostly newspaper articles which reflect the situation in Slovakia. Due to the short period of time since the pandemic began, there is still limited academic literature which would help us to narrow the scope of our research.

4. Populist repertoire during the COVID-19 pandemic

Our case studies – the two prime ministers during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic - have been examined through content analysis of their statements in the Slovak national parliament. We divided their statements according to their role, which changed due to the elections in February 2020. Therefore, we analysed Matovič initially as a member of parliament, and then as prime minister from 21 March 2020. We made the same distinction with Pellegrini, who was prime minister till 21 March 2020 and then a member of parliament.

We have decided to look at their statements in parliament because we perceive this platform as important for democratic decision-making processes and for the sustainability of liberal democracies in a time of crisis. At the outset, we established that before March 2020 there were no statements about COVID-19 by either of these two actors. We must note that they were in a specific situation, since they were at the end of the electoral campaign prior to the 29 February election and at that time there was still no case of COVID-19 in Slovakia. However, the presence of populism was more than clear in their statements. In case of Matovič we can see a strong framework of ‘the people and the elite’ and also of protectionism. There are different groups he included in the term ‘the people’: the elderly, those who died because of the failing healthcare system or those who had lost money to non-banking entities. There is only one group that he put into the frame of “the elite”: the government and their friends.

When we look at Pellegrini’s statements in the first quarter of the year, we see a similar framework to Matovič’s. Once again, we must remember that he was in the middle of an election campaign for most of the time so that attacks against opponents were the daily business of all parties. However, when analysing this

period, we can identify ‘the people and the elite’ frame as well as ‘protectionism’. We were able to identify specific styles of communication as well: Pellegrini theatrically criticised the behaviour of a group opposition members of parliament who were blocking the speaker’s chair in parliament, and it is clear that Pellegrini is trying to be authentic, using plain language to explain what the opposition is doing and how such behaviour offends democratic principles. He uses words such as “our Slovakia”, “our country”, “those people who disrespect this place”, “our citizens” as well as referring to things done in the past. An interesting finding in this period was that there is a difference between the rhetoric of both actors. This was visible especially when talking about the ‘the people and the elite’. While Pellegrini more often used broad, non-specific groups (citizens, people), Matovič used more specific ones (pensioners, grandchildren, mothers, children etc.). This may be a sign of a different usage of populism, particularly by Matovič.

The findings from this period are that there is not a lot of difference between our two cases. This confirms the claim of Kazharski and Makarychev (2020) that populism is a universal style for different actors. Even though there were no statements about COVID-19 in this period, we have decided to analyse it so that we have a baseline for examining the actors’ behaviour. The goal was to compare their behaviour before the pandemic and after, and to discover whether a serious event of this kind might change their argumentation style.

Within the second period, after the elections and the change of role of the two actors, we identified and analysed only statements related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The one occasion where we were able to analyse both at the same time was the presentation of the newly elected government’s programme (20–22 April 2020). In the speech of Igor Matovič we can identify ‘the people and the elite’ framing, crisis rhetoric and dramatization of an already bad situation in the country, which can also be called ‘protectionism’. The economic context dominated the framing. At a specific moment ‘the people’ is for the first time represented by healthcare workers, who should be treated with respect, and whose interests were not important for the previous government, who stole money from the state (the elite group). Matovič’s speech was very long, and we have analysed only those parts which related to pandemic, although similar rhetoric was present when discussing other issues. The speech also referred to an opinion poll, which the newly elected government had used when preparing its programme. Using Brubaker’s terminology, this is an anti-institutional repertoire.

As a response to this speech and the presentation of the government’s programme for the next four years, Pellegrini followed with strong criticism. Issues connected with the COVID-19 pandemic were also in the frame of protection, fear, crisis rhetoric (all under protectionism) as well as the frame of ‘the people and the elite’. The people are in this case the Slovak people and nation, and elderly people are mentioned as well. The elite represents the newly elected government or the prime minister himself, who is not capable of handling the crisis. The context of the majority of parts of the speech analysed is economic and in a small number of cases social (referring to elderly people in care homes).

In another, earlier Matovič speech (01.04.2020), which was full of criticism of the parliament, Matovič repeatedly framed his words in the repertoire of ‘the people and the elite’ as well as using protectionism, and for the first time we can observe ‘anti-institutionalism’. Once again, the people are represented by the ordinary people in Slovakia, voters or senior citizens. The elite is the opposition (and in particular the party that had governed previously, Smer-SD). Matovič and his government created a fund for supporting people who were facing problems during the COVID-19 pandemic and were not able to access support from other government schemes. In this speech Matovič presented this fund as a tool to help people, because existing legislation is inadequate. Pellegrini responded with criticism of a draft law for tracking smart phones. We can again see the context of rights and especially people’s right to privacy. The rest of the speech continued in the frame protectionism (“we are prepared to help Slovakia and therefore we will support good ideas”).

Pellegrini presented a motion to reject Matovič as prime minister. A lot of his argumentation was connected with the COVID-19 pandemic and within those parts we were able to identify frames of protectionism (dramatization, crisis rhetoric) and all of these were in an economic context. This was the same in further statements by Pellegrini. Most often he put his statements into the context of economic rights or issues and framed his words in ‘protectionism’ through crisis rhetoric, dramatization or referring to things already done. ‘The people and the elite’ framework is basically present all the time. In terms of the vertical and horizontal division of this element the elite group is for most of the time the same – the government and the prime minister - while the people change depending on the context (mayors and municipalities, parents). We were able to identify fundamentally the same division in all of Pellegrini’s statements.

The situation with Matovič later in the year is similar. We can identify references to things that he had already done, dramatization, crisis rhetoric or the articulation of protection (all under protectionism). His specific way of communicating, which is the fifth element, manifested itself in the form of theatricality, authenticity, plain language and attacks on others (usually the opposition). His words were most often spoken in an economic context with a division between the people and the elite (people with serious illnesses, ordinary Slovak people, people in state quarantine as ‘the people’ and the opposition as “the elite”). We were also able to identify the presence of ‘anti-institutionalism’ when Matovič decided to criticize the way the media worked and the fact that they produced negative information about him at the wrong time, when he was preparing himself for an important summit in Brussels. In this case he not only criticised the media, but he also put himself into the position of an individual who “is going to save the country” (23.07.2020). In Matovič’s case it is interesting that while the vertical division of the elite is the same as with Pellegrini - whoever is standing against him (the government when he was a member of parliament or the opposition when he was prime minister) – but the horizontal elites are not only in the form of the opposition but also in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic itself. We identify a tendency to put the pandemic in the position of an external (outside) threat.

The presence of populism, as Brubaker frames it, is clearly evident in the statements of the two government leaders in parliament. However, it is not only a characteristic of government power as both actors use this kind of rhetoric from both positions – as prime minister and as a member of parliament. We have decided to look more closely at specific elements as evidence during COVID-19 pandemic. In the next section we analyze ‘anti-institutionalism’ and its manifestations in the handling of the pandemic.

5. Who is in charge of the crisis?

The situation under Pellegrini was calmer and we would say also less chaotic or easier to identify. We must note that Pellegrini (and his government) were responsible for managing the pandemic for only a short time so there is only limited ‘space’ for analysis. Yet at the same time, Pellegrini was not only prime minister but also responsible for the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic and therefore had to manage two arenas at the same time. The very first steps were taken in January 2020, when he decided to organize a meeting of crisis staff within the Ministry of Health. This step was in accordance with existing legislation (Act no. 387/2002 Coll.) and there was no initiative to create something new. According to a press conference held on 27 January 2020 he put spoke as the person responsible for the Ministry of Health and not as prime minister. Therefore, he is not attempting to appear in a dominant position as prime minister (The Government Office of SR 2020). The situation was managed mainly through the Ministry of Health or other ministries responsible for specific issues (MZ SR 2020; The Government Office of SR 2020a).

On 27 February 2020 there was a meeting of the Security Council of the Slovak Republic, which is a long-standing advisory body of the Slovak government. Again, this was not an innovation. Also, the role of the

prime minister does not appear to be the dominant one. the same day, 27 February 2020, there was decision to create a crisis team within the Ministry of Health. This crisis team, however, was under the leadership of the Minister of the Interior (MZ SR 2020a). On 6 March 2020, after confirmation of the first positive COVID-19 case in Slovakia, the central crisis staff announced the prohibition of visits to hospitals and care homes (The Government Office of SR 2020b). This was the legitimate process of decision making with respect to rules created for such a crisis management.

The situation changed in line with the increasing numbers of patients positive with COVID-19. On 12 March 2020 there was a decision of the central crisis team to implement several special measures (MZ SR 2020b). On 16 March 2020 a partial state of emergency was announced in Slovakia, which only focused on selected parts of the healthcare system such as hospitals and other providers of health care. This decision was made by of the Slovak government as a preventative measure (MZ SR 2020c)

Until 21 March 2020 (the day the government changed) there is no clear evidence from press releases of the Government Office and the Ministry of Health that prime minister Pellegrini was the dominant actor within the system of crisis government. He worked in cooperation with other actors such as the Ministry of the Interior and advisory bodies. In general, he acted in accordance with existing state structures and left the management of specific sectors to those responsible for them.

From the outset, the Public Health Authority was a very close collaborator of the government and the Ministry of Health. This body's position is specific because its chief representative was present from the beginning of pandemic and explained the situation and how it was being handled. The cooperation between the Pellegrini government and the Public Health Authority was clear and has continued under the government of Igor Matovič. However, the legal position of this body was, and to an extent still is, problematic. It has announced various very strict measures which could restrict people's freedom and it appears that it was not entitled to do so because it does not have the necessary competencies (Piešťanský and Vernanec 2020). Such measures could have been announced and implemented by the government or the Ministry of Health and it is interesting to see that such competencies were moved to a different kind of body.

Matovič took over the reins of government on 21 March 2020. At first, he continued with the procedures established by the previous government, but after a short period we can see attempts by the prime minister to assert dominance in COVID-19 crisis management. To be clear: we are not questioning the role of the prime minister in this kind of situation, but we want to focus on his dominance in different sectors. He continued to cooperate with for example the Ministry of Health, but often commented on and explained issues that are within the competencies of other bodies (see The Government Office of the SR 2020c; The Government Office of the SR 2020d; The Government Office of the SR 2020e). Press releases from the Government Office of the Slovak Republic became more frequent and were full of information about the prime minister's press conferences or statements of the prime minister together with other actors.

The new platform Matovič decided to use as an advisory body was the consortium of experts (later redesignated the Pandemic Commission). There was early evidence of this body before Easter 2020. The prime minister announced that he was organising a meeting with this consortium to decide about measures to regulate the movement of people during the Easter holidays. However, at the same time he had already announced that it would be necessary to implement such measures. On the one hand it appears to have been his decision, while on the other hand there seems to have been a desire to move responsibility for these harsh steps on to somebody else. In the end, the decision on restrictions was proposed to the government by the prime minister (The Government Office of the SR 2020f).

Another body created by Matovič was an Economic Crisis Directorate controlled by the Slovak finance minister. Interestingly, this body was created shortly after the Ministry of Economics had created its own crisis team. However, Matovič's economic crisis directorate was not located in the Ministry of Economics or Finance but was set up in the Government Office of the Slovak Republic, which is basically the prime minister's office (The Government Office of the SR 2020g). In terms of Brubaker's paradoxes (2020), this confirms that the crisis is not only significant for health protection, but projects itself into other areas, as there is also an economic crisis.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic finished during the summer of 2020. The period between the first and second was controlled by the Pandemic Commission under the Minister of Health. Accordingly, Matovič once claimed: "Last Friday, I tried to give an account of the period when I was trying to fight the corona crisis. The results spoke for themselves. Today, this role was voluntarily taken over by the Pandemic Commission. I am not a member of it, I can go there, but I do not have the right to vote as well. (...) If I see that they cannot handle the situation, I will try to get involved" (Matovič 2020, in Javorský 2020). Later in September, there was another change. At this point the prime minister claimed that the Pandemic Commission was only an advisory body, and it did not matter what they decided to do as it was the responsibility of the government. In this regard we would like to cite a commentary by Juraj Javorský (2020a), from the daily newspaper *Denník N*, who writes: "So while up until now the Prime Minister himself has elevated the conclusions of the Council of Experts, who later mutated into a pandemic commission, to the status of almost sacred, untouchable truths, from now on they are just 'opinions'. The Prime Minister has taken the floor". This also confirms one of Brubaker's (2020) paradoxes – expertise. On one hand Matovič knew he needed experts to manage the epidemic properly, but on the other hand his behaviour towards them showed that he underestimated their importance and specialist knowledge.

As we mentioned earlier, the situation under the Matovič government was confusing and it was hard to obtain confirmed data in order to analyse the steps he took in government. We can clearly identify an anti-institutionalist element as defined by Brubaker (2017) when the prime minister wants to have dominance within the existing state structures which have to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are also moments when he decides to do nothing. At one point he is present at all press conferences of all government ministries but later the Minister of Health and the Pandemic Commission seem to be acting on their own. This is specific to Matovič's style of government. This method of governing highlights the differences between Peter Pellegrini, a politician operating within a standard political party with long-term experience of government, and Igor Matovič, the founder and leader of a rather maverick party which had never before had responsibility for leading a country and who himself has only had political experience as a member of parliament.

5. Conclusion

Isaac Newton's third law of motion holds that "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction". We showed that populism in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular in Slovakia, is a window of opportunity for studying how "reactions" differ. This paper identifies differences between two government leaders in how they governed during a crisis and also in how they communicated during the crisis. We agree with Kazharski and Makarychev (2020) that when we talk about populism we are not talking about where parties are placed on the political spectrum; it is the style used by different actors, no matter what ideological preferences they have, or, as in our case, whether or not they are fighting one of the worst crises in the history of independent Slovakia.

We hope to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomena of populism, as Rooduijn (2019) has pointed out the consequences that populism has on how democracy functions. We look at the rhetoric of the

government representatives responsible for handling the COVID-19 crisis according to the categories suggested by Brubaker. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 18) state that “populists are anti-establishment politicians”, so we looked at the creation of new institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic and who was in charge of them. We also investigated how the debate about the COVID-19 pandemic measure was framed under two different prime ministers in Slovakia. If we compare the two actors we analysed, both framed their speeches in parliament in terms of protectionism as well as using the division between the people and the elite. Most often we were able to identify signs of protection, dramatization of a situation, crisis rhetoric etc. Both mention similar groups (Matovič in particular) when referring to ‘the people’, and both designate the political group which opposes them as “the elite”. When in government the opposition represents the elite and vice versa. It is the same in the vertical as well as the horizontal division of this element. We can see a slight difference in the case of the horizontal division. Here we note that Matovič has presented the COVID-19 pandemic as an external threat to ‘the people’. Brubaker’s other elements were not so prominent in the statements and speeches analysed. One interesting point was that both actors sometimes claimed in their speeches that the other side was populist or behaving in a populist manner. We might agree that both are right. We argue that even such a critical situation as the COVID-19 pandemic has not influenced the way selected actors frame their messages to the people. Both try to gain as much as possible in their political fight for power.

How do the decision-making processes studied appear in terms of the populist repertoire? To answer this, we analysed what Brubaker called ‘anti-institutionalism’ as an element within the management of the COVID-19 crisis by both prime ministers and also looked at Brubaker’s paradoxes. While in previous part of analysis the actors were very similar, but when looking specifically at the COVID-19 crisis this was not the case. We were not able to identify clear evidence of anti-institutionalism in the case of Peter Pellegrini. From our point of view, the steps he took were in accordance with existing legislation and his role did not appear to exceed his competencies. He used established crisis management tools in cooperation with other state bodies and institutions. This contrasted with Igor Matovič, who not only created his own structures, but was very dominant over those that already existed as well. In Matovič’s case one can also observe Brubaker’s (2020) paradoxes, in both his understanding of the crisis and underestimation of expert opinion.

Our timeline was influenced by the change of government at the very beginning of the pandemic, which has limited our research. Nevertheless, this creates a window of opportunity for continuing our research as there was a further change in prime minister a year after the election, with Matovič being replaced by his party colleague Eduard Heger. The “paradoxes” of the pandemic can bring about changes in the political situation.

Our findings in this paper are based on statements and speeches in parliament or official press releases, which are typical forms of communication for political parties and leaders. However, looking at social networks could bring another perspective, and we could also follow changes within the party system, where individual political actors who try to reach their audience directly are becoming more important. Both our actors are examples of these changes though it is not clear to what extent this is a formal strategy.

Norris and Inglehart (2019, 67) explain that “populistic rhetoric tells a simple story about the silent majority of ordinary, hardworking people rallying behind champions fighting against morally degenerate vested interest.” That is very true in the Slovak case during the COVID-19 crisis, which has produced even harsher populist rhetoric, and could potentially lead Slovak democracy down the same path as other CEE countries. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 10) point out, democracies still die, but democratic breakdowns are caused “[...] not by generals and soldiers but by elected governments themselves”.

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Acknowledgements

Authors would like to thank to Dr. Oľga Gyárfášová and Dr. Karen Henderson for their help and valuable advice while writing and editing the article.

Funding: This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. PP-COVID-20-0026.